

## **International Successes and Domestic Policy Dilemmas: Re-Evaluating Canadian and Quebec Cinemas**

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***International Successes and Domestic Policy  
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"Working with Canadian cinema," writes Peter Harcourt, "one labours like an archaeologist, rummaging among fragments scattered about within archives, private collections and specialized digital and video outlets, assembling pieces of a culture – indeed, of several cultures – that, one day, we may recognize as our own" (248). To some, this might seem a rather pessimistic statement given the recent national and international success garnered by Canadian and Quebec filmmakers like Denys Arcand and Deepa Mehta (to name only the most recent). Surely Canadian cinema has moved beyond the days of obscurity, low-budget features shown in art house theatres for ridiculously short periods. Or has it? What Harcourt describes as both the "hide and seek" and "hit and run" aspects of Canadian cinema continue to define the industry (films exist without distribution and are thus not screened; without industry support, the filmmakers themselves often disappear into oblivion). Experienced Canadian cinema devotees need only to take a glance at the Canadian entries at this year's Sundance Film Festival (2009) to marvel at the number of productions from up-and-coming filmmakers and then sigh in resignation at the fate to which these films are likely destined: a place in the vaults of Telefilm Canada. Of the books under review in this essay, André Loiselle and Tom McSorley's *Self-Portraits: The Cinemas of Canada since Telefilm* explains in depth the impact public policy has had on the Canadian film industry and thus offers insights on the abundance/absence paradox described by Harcourt. The other two anthologies spring from a different, yet related impulse, i.e. a desire to provide an overview and/or guide to Canadian films and analytical trends that differ from other notable collections of the past few years first and foremost by virtue of their place of publication: *The Cinema of Canada* is published in England in Wallflower's prestigious 24 Frames Collection and *Le cinéma au Québec : tradition et modernité* by Fides' "Archives des

lettres canadiennes” which is devoted to research on Quebec literature in French. Without a doubt, these two edited volumes are designed to reach new audiences. Without wanting to neglect recent more narrowly focused studies of Canadian screen adaptations and a new critical history of the NFB that have received attention elsewhere (i.e. Peter Dickinson’s *Screening Gender, Framing Genre: Canadian Literature into Film* and Zoë Druick’s *Projecting Canada: Government Policy and Documentary Film at the National Film Board*), the focus in this review will be on the continued plethora of edited collections and overviews that seems to bear witness to a lingering need to “take stock”, as it were, of Canadian cinema and a “packaging” for the rest of the world that warrants investigation and evaluation (indicative of this trend is the University of Toronto Press’s new *Canadian Cinema Collection* of individual film guides modelled on the British Film Institute [BFI] *Film Classics* series).

Stéphane-Albert Boulais’s *Le cinéma au Québec: tradition et modernité*, a 345-page, twenty-one chapter volume, complete with a Bibliography (prepared by Yves Lever) and Index to filmmakers, scriptwriters and films, is indeed a carefully prepared document in keeping with the tradition of “Archives des lettres canadiennes”. The volume is divided into four broad sections: “Parcours” (Voyages), “Écriture Cinéma” (Cinematic Writing), “Regards sur le réel” (Views of the Real), and “Rencontres” (Convergences).<sup>1</sup> The first, “Parcours”, offers an overview of lesser-known aspects of Quebec cinema with a particular focus on scriptwriting, archives, silent and early ethnographic films. Pierre Véronneau’s contribution on the beginnings of film projection in Quebec argues for a territorial approach to early cinema in the province (all films, notwithstanding their use or origin, should be considered *Québécois* if they feature any aspect of Quebec culture) in an effort to form a complete picture of how Quebec was filmed between 1897-1913 and, in turn, what impact this has had on subsequent generations of filmmakers. Esther Pelletier and Steven Morin adopt a similar archival approach in their overview of “Le scénario au Québec de 1913 à 2003” (The Script in Quebec from 1913 to 2003), where they outline (not surprisingly) the absence of scripts in early Quebec fiction film (*le cinéma direct* movement was defined, of course, by the evacuation of the script) and the professionalization of scriptwriting since the creation of Telefilm (in 1983) and the increasing importance of *La société des auteurs de radio, télévision et cinéma* (SARTEC). The second section focuses on different forms of Quebec cinematic language (the language of sound, music, voice-overs, script-writing, the camera, and the oeuvre of institutionally recognized filmmakers). Of particular importance in this section is Denis Bachand’s comprehensive study of Denys Arcand’s films that carefully situates each film’s context and reception, arguing in the end for an appreciation of Arcand as the product of a certain socio-historical moment: “born into a highly religious, inward-looking, puritan society, in the midst of a contradictory national affirmation and awakening to the rest

of the world, Arcand found himself confronted with the double constraint of making films appropriate for within (Quebec) and situating his own work on the international scene" (112). Four other articles in the volume's third and fourth sections focus on the work of four individual filmmakers (i.e. Pierre Perrault, Robert Lepage, Colin Low and Léa Pool) while the remaining contributions trace the evolution of specific themes and/or tackle filmmaking trends in Quebec in the light of recent French social theory.

The variety of angles, subjects, and tones is indeed one of the strengths of *Le cinéma au Québec* as it combines contributions by academics and filmmakers both. Exemplary of the latter category is Jean Pierre Lefebvre's "Entre le mot et l'image" (Between words and images), a caustic summary of the evolution of Quebec cinema in which he pays tribute to the "new language" invented by the *cinéma direct* generation, and laments the "insignificant images" and "aesthetic flamboyance" of current filmmaking schools. Aesthetics, he laments, are no longer in the service of ethics, as they were at the beginning of Quebec cinema (163). Also of note are Marie-Chantal Killeen's study of the use of the disembodied voice in Jean-Claude Lauzon's *Léolo* which makes use of both French and American theories of the practice of the voice-over (Rick Altman, Glenda Wagner, Michel Chion) and Marion Froger's Deleuzian-inspired analysis of the practice of community-based documentary film as stemming from Quebec society's longstanding anti-institutional stance and the socio-historical importance of the "communitas" in Quebec culture (Froger borrows from the work of Quebec historians and literary theorists Fernand Dumont, Michel Biron, and Gérard Bouchard). A similar comparative interdisciplinary approach is taken up by Jacques Michaud in "Le Royaume Suspendu" where he argues for a renewed appreciation of lesser known early Quebec ethnographic films (i.e. Maurice Proulx's *En pays neufs*, Bernard Devlin's *Les brûlés*, Pierre Perrault's *Un royaume vous attend*) in the context of the "retour à la terre" (back to the land) discourse of the first half of the 20th century and its literary equivalents. While the pastoral lyricism of Proulx's *En pays neuf* might suggest that the colonization of Abitibi could represent "a sweet revenge against History that has never been kind to French-Canadians" (168), the later films expose governmental neglect and mismanagement that contributed to the failure of the northern settlement enterprise. Finally, Boulais's epilogue explores Quebec's contribution to cinematic forms through seven key films and filmmakers since 1939. The inclusion here of the works of Albert Tessier, Michel Brault, Claude Jutra and Denys Arcand is to be expected—they are indeed the unorthodox trailblazers of Quebec cinema. Yet to round out this summary with the films of André Forcier and Kim Nguyen as indicative of emerging trends and talent strikes the reader as rather curious. What of Louis Bélanger's quiet masterpiece *Gaz Bar Blues*, Bernard Émond's elegiac *La Neuvaine*, Jean-François Pouliot's über-popular *La grande séduction* or even Richard Trogi's raunchy-tragic *Montréal-Québec* to

name only a few notable recent films? They are all, in their own right, equally if not more representative of bright lights in contemporary Quebec filmmaking. Boulais's concluding corpus reflects the strengths and weaknesses of the volume as a whole—and to a certain extent the cinema industry in Quebec. If much can still be learned from the consecrated classics of the past (to which this volume does a great service), the cinema of the last twenty years is harder to grasp from a theoretical perspective, victim, according to Jean Pierre Lefebvre (to give the last word to a self-avowed Quiet Revolution radical), of the influence of advertising, television, postmodern relativity, and global multimedia which have all fostered the production of a multitude of films, brilliant in form, yet artificial in subject.

Jerry White's *The Cinema of Canada* also surveys the terrain of Canadian cinema but with a different tone and format. While contributions to *Le cinéma au Québec* were oftentimes hesitant in tone (unsure perhaps if the intended audience was well versed in the field of Quebec cinema), *The Cinema of Canada* seems destined primarily for an international cinema audience. The anthology consists of twenty-four short and precise individually-authored articles each on a key Canadian film. The articles are uniform in length and designed to both analyze the films and explain their importance as illustrative of key moments in Canadian cinema history. All anthologies imply a choice; more material is left out than included. To find articles here on films such as *Pour la suite du monde*, *On est coton*, *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*, *Exotica*, *Le déclin de l'empire américain* and *Earth* is far from surprising; other choices, such as *The Winds of Fogo*, *Asivaqtin/The Hunters*, *Dead Man* and *Bearwalker*, are more unusual. As Jerry White explains in his introduction, the choice of these particular twenty-four films is based on a desire to respect the "three distinctive cinematic traditions that have emerged in the nation-state we call Canada: French, English and Aboriginal" (3). White has also included documentaries as well as fiction films; the practice of documentary, he reminds us, is "one aspect of Canadian cinema that crosses linguistic and or national divides" (4). The idea itself is quite bold and its impetus laudable—for that reason alone it deserves to be commended (even though Atom Egoyan expresses his reservations in the book's preface, claiming that the "triangular reality" (English, French, Aboriginal) is problematic as it erases the contribution of immigrant-origin filmmakers who are put under the umbrella of anglophone film). However, the content of *The Cinema of Canada* is at times uneven. Some contributors (labouring like Harcourt's archaeologist) were able to rise to the challenge of situating a film that virtually no one has seen in the context of the National Film Board's initiatives to develop aboriginal cinema (particularly successful in this respect are the articles on *You are on Indian Land* and *Foster Child*). Other entries seemed to lose sight of specific cinematic considerations and thus ended up reinscribing the aboriginal films as mere social documents and/or

records of aboriginal realities. Jerry White's article on the little-known 1977 Michael Moon documentary *Asivaqtin/The Hunters* skilfully avoids this dilemma by arguing that the film is a stepping stone in the development of a photographic sensibility that will come to define Arctic media and Canadian film in general. For him, Moon's work belongs alongside other better-known Aboriginal films and classic Canadian "handmade films" (e.g. Joyce Wieland's *Reason over Passion*) which are distinctly subjective and where filmmakers act as artisans. The way in which filmmakers like Moon "come up from the middle", White explains, between conventional and avant-garde strategies, is actually a characterising feature of a lot of important cinema in Canada (108).

Generally speaking, *The Cinema of Canada* contains an interesting mix of established and up-and-coming film scholars working both within Canada and internationally. Some are experts in the field and provide insight and perspective on canonical films; others—I regret to add—seem slightly out of their element. While the longer format of the chapters in *Le cinéma au Québec* allows for a juxtaposition of close readings and illustrations of larger trends in contemporary film theory, the short, concise format of the articles here does not. Both the chapters on Anne Claire Poirier's *Mourir à tue-tête* and Micheline Lanctôt's *Sonatine* substitute nonessential theoretical considerations for much needed historical and institutional context. While several articles in *Le cinéma au Québec* will no doubt encourage renewed interest in Maurice Proulx's *En pays neufs* as an important cinematic and ethnographic document, Pierre Véronneau's article on the same film in *The Cinema of Canada* is vague, failing to make clear to readers the content of this rare film; (unfortunately the article also suffers from an awkwardness in phrasing resulting from the translation from French to English). These weaknesses do not detract however from the overall quality of the volume which features expertly handled articles on *Le déclin de l'empire américain*, *Exotica*, *Atanarjuat/The Fast Runner* and a rare *Québécois* perspective (thanks to André Lavoie) on the Canadian art house milestone *I Heard the Mermaids Singing*.

The choice of Shirley Cheechoo's 2002 fiction film *Bearwalker* (a melodrama of domestic violence set on a fictional reserve in 1976) to round out *The Cinema of Canada* underscores once again the challenges facing many Canadian feature filmmakers: the film had no theatrical release. That readers are encouraged to contact Cheechoo in order to view *Bearwalker* speaks volumes about both production and distribution problems in the Canadian film industry. André Loiselle and Tom McSorley's *Self-Portraits: The Cinemas of Canada Since Telefilm* takes aim at precisely these problems and paradoxes. The book focuses on the Canadian film industry since the inception of Telefilm Canada in 1983, tackling the contradictory messages in state funding, the question of a Canadian aesthetic (the success of genre films within Quebec), and the uneven growth

of regional film production across Canada. Designed as a follow-up to *Self-Portrait: Essays on the Canadian and Quebec Cinemas*, first published in 1980 by Piers Handling (director of the Toronto Film Festival) and Pierre Véronneau, *Self-Portraits* is divided into two sections ("Art versus Commerce" and "Regional Aesthetics") and features lengthy chapters by undoubtedly some of the best film scholars in Canada: Christine Ramsay, Brenda Longfellow, Peter Urquhart, and the aforementioned Jerry White. Despite an unfortunate amount of typographical errors, *Self-Portraits* is a veritable treasure chest of analysis and information on Canadian film funding policies and especially on the history and development of cinema practices in the "rest of English Canada" (meaning outside Toronto). Where else, other than in specialized film journals, can one find a discussion of the "Pacific New Wave", the reimagining of Saskatchewan in the context of the "New West" debate, mention of any Manitoba filmmakers *other* than Guy Maddin, and a passionate *homage* to the work of Maritime filmmaker William MacGillivray? Although they are analyzing different corpuses and describing different geographic locations, the authors' preoccupations converge on a number of yet unresolved dilemmas surrounding the role of the state in the production of cultural commodities. To what extent can so-called "runaway productions" (television and film projects shot on location in Canada, but produced for an international market) nourish and foster local film industries? Does the cultural value of a product always trump its economic success at the box office (e.g. the cultural elite rejection of Canadian made "stinkers" like Porky's)? What would the industry look like today if distribution measures had been brought into play at the time of the transition from the CFDC to Telefilm (perhaps one outcome would be that potential viewers would not have to contact filmmakers directly to obtain their films). The perspectives on these debates offered here are frank, refreshing, and unconventional. André Loiselle, in his contribution, documents how English-Canadian critics seem to gravitate towards certain films from Quebec (*Eldorado*, *Léolo*, *Octobre*) for reasons that, he argues, are linked to English Canada's need to see Quebec as a hotbed of "politically radical, artistically daring, culturally outrageous and emotionally authentic freaks" (Loiselle and McSorley 77) or, as in the case of *Léolo*, "a world where abject poverty and sordid acculturation co-exist with fertile creativity, intense artistic visions and rich European traditions" (Loiselle and McSorley 83). To get a true sense of Quebec film culture, critics need to examine the so-called "popular" films that do relatively well at the domestic (Quebec) box office and thus avoid the exoticism and condescension that have characterized the English Canadian view of the other solitude (Pierre Véronneau's "Genres and Variations: The Audiences of Quebec Cinema" makes precisely the same point). Diane Burgess examines how "[u]biquitous drug use, leaky condos, gentrification, urban decay and suburban sprawl communicate realities about Vancouver's identity that belie the city's role as a stunning background for the locations

industry” (Loiselle and McSorley, 156), thus advocating for a framework that better takes into account the interdependence (creative antagonisms) of divergent sectors of B.C. filmmaking and the impact of “runaway” productions on the health of the local industry. Brenda Longfellow offers a terse history of the rise (and fall?) of the so-called Canadian New Wave, the 1980s and 1990s Toronto filmmakers (e.g. Egoyan, Rozema) nurtured by both the arts council and the co-op film movement, and whose success was used to rationalize the creation of the Ontario Film Development Corporation (OFDC). Longfellow argues for a Jameson-inspired analysis that links continental economic integration with the narrative sensibilities, thematic centres and international art house audience of these films whose message could be said to constitute an urban, multicultural aesthetic response to post-NAFTA multi-national hegemony. Equally complex linkages between provincial film policy, location shooting, regional stereotypes and creative production are tackled by Christine Ramsay in “Made in Saskatchewan!” For her, the province’s local filmmaking is to be understood in the context of a shift from the older, hypostatized regional space-myth of “the Prairie” to the newer, more urban social spatialization of the “New West” (i.e. Regina). Films like Bob Clark’s *Now and Forever* and Trevor Cunningham’s *Falling Angels* are examples of a new Saskatchewan cinema that is “taking an interesting turn away from the popular white male prairie ethos and its stereotyping of the overwhelming and inhospitable landscape” towards the perhaps darker but in many ways richer contemporary urban themes of racism and familial dysfunction (Loiselle and McSorley 227).

All in all, the books under consideration here confirm, complement, and challenge prevailing ideas about Canadian cinema. The reader is left with the overall impression of a rich and multi-faceted industry as evidenced by White’s three cinematic traditions, Boulais’s comprehensive study of cinematic language in Quebec, and the diverse and ever-evolving cinemas in the Canadian regions (in Loiselle and McSorley). Clearly, the changing nature of Canadian film policy *shapes* but does not *define* cinematic production in Canada (as the importance of film co-ops and independent creative endeavours show). Meanwhile, numerous lesser-known films await discovery while canonical works undoubtedly warrant a second look. But as Peter Harcourt warns, getting one’s hands on them remains (more than) half the challenge.

## Note

1. All translations from the French are by the reviewer.

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